

as far as the cemetery gates by brawlite

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Summary:

Steve finds Billy Hargrove loitering at a cemetery as the sun rises. They share a bottle of cheap-as-hell whiskey, a bit of body heat, and some secrets, too.

as far as the cemetery gates

Author's Note:

alternate title: and when she died i couldn't cry
from *cemetery gates* by pantera

"I'm glad you're not here," he says, plain and simple, no remorse, no bite. His words are muted and muffled by all the grass, the dirt and the heavy air around him. They fall lifeless into the silence of the cold, misty morning.

Indiana is too flat, too full of endless nothing. He feels alone in this place. Desolate and withering, too. Even when he talks, the nothingness eats it all up, ravenous and insatiable. Devouring him whole, bones and blood and everything else. It's an honest to god horror story, here in this empty place.

Billy walks, eyes scanning names and histories he doesn't know, doesn't recognize. They're an endless stream of someone else's memories, someone else's grief.

He picks a name, any name -- today, it's *Annette McGowan Heane*.

"God, you'd hate this town," he says to his feet, to the bottle of shitty whiskey he drops into the grass next to them. He presses his back against the cool marble of the headstone and then allows himself to slide down, planting his ass in the dirt when he finishes his descent. His hand falls on the cool glass of whiskey bottle, pulling it close like a goddamn security blanket. *You will be missed*, the fading etching in the headstone says. Like hell -- the marble is cracking in age and there's moss growing in the letters. No one's been by this grave in ages. It's forgotten. *She's* forgotten. Billy presses his head up against the carving anyway, like he can absorb the sentiment just by physical proximity. He'd like to be somebody who'd be missed.

The sun is just starting to rise over the treetops, painting everything in a weird, golden light. For a brief moment he misses the sight of the sunrise over the Pacific. The way the wind smelled just before the dawn.

There's no real water in Hawkins, just dirt and fields and long stretches of boring trees. There's cows and corn and absolutely nothing else.

The closest ocean is seven hundred miles away. Home is even farther.

"It's so flat and boring and *stupid*." He sounds about five years old and feels it, too. He channels that, picking up a rock, chucking it as far as he can manage with an angry flick of his wrist. He hears the *tink* of it hitting a headstone a ways away. He doesn't hear it fall against the ground, afterward, but it must. Everything falls, eventually.

It had been a warm, sunny day when they'd buried her.

Today, it's shit out. It's cold and miserable and boring, like it always is in Indiana.

He takes a slug of the whiskey, but it doesn't do much to warm him at all.

Billy misses sticking his bare toes in the water-logged sand, he misses the way he'd plant his feet and the earth would move underneath them with each crashing wave. He misses the way his mom used to walk with him, hand in hand, chasing the footprints the waves hadn't eaten up yet. For miles and miles and miles.

Another slug, another gulp, until his chest burns with the cheap stuff. Until he feels warmer, until time and the memories of the ocean and the coast and the wind fade a little bit further away.

"He's worse now," Billy says. He digs his heels into the dirt, watches as he upends dew-heavy grass. "God, he's so much worse." The sky, when he tips his head back against the grave to look up, is a boring grey now. Monotone and flat, just like the fields.

Billy clenches his teeth and remembered the way she would always smile, even when there was no reason to. She always fuckin' smiled.

Be careful, Billy. Your father, he's got a bit of a temper, she'd always say. But it was a normal warning, for a normal family. Sure, Neil'd yell, he'd fume, and he'd rage -- but that was it. The buck stopped

there. There was no throwing things across the room, and certainly no throwing punches. Once upon a time, Neil Hargrove was just a normal fucking man, a normal fucking husband, and a normal fucking father.

What guy didn't have a bit of a temper, right?

But that was before Billy's mom got sick.

Before his mom died.

Be careful, Billy.

The whiskey is shitty, but it's better than being sober today.

He also feels like it's a maybe little sacrilegious to be sporting a black eye and a split lip today, too -- but it's not like he has a choice in that. It's not like *Neil* gave him a choice in that. He tongues his fat lip and thinks about what his mom would think of them now, blood dripping down her son's face from her husband's fist. She probably wouldn't smile much at that.

Jesus. Billy's life sucks.

It's not like he's done much to put good karma or whatever into the world, though. His mom had been real into that kinda hippie shit. All flowy dresses and feather earrings and endless love. *You get what you give, Billy*, she used to always say. *If you want the world to be a better, brighter place, it has to start with you.*

It's a pity that Billy's world fell to pieces and went dark as hell when she kicked it. Maybe he'd be more amenable to being nicer if the world was nicer to him.

"Why'd you have to get sick, huh? Why couldn't it've been him, instead?" he asks. He knows no one's listening. Not his mom, not Annette, not the endless multitude of bodies buried beneath him. Even if they were listening, no one's got an answer for that, either. Death doesn't make much sense.

That doesn't mean Billy'll stop talking, though.

Sometimes it's just nice to talk.

Billy doesn't talk much. Or rather, he talks a hell of a lot, but never says much at all. The only person he ever used to really talk to was his mom. Now that she's gone, there's not really much point, is there? It's not like anyone wants to hear what Billy fucking Hargrove has to say.

The only people at school who want anything to do with him are mindless drones who laugh at all of his jokes and trail after him like lost fucking ducklings following the California breeze. Anyone with half a brain stays clear of him -- and he doesn't blame them. He's not much company to be around, once you get past the party tricks.

Max stays clear of him, too.

That -- that probably hurts more than it should. If he's being real honest with himself.

Not that Billy necessarily ever *wanted* her to like him. She just *did*. And it was nice. For a hot second, back in sunny, breezy, California, Max'd thought he was *cool*. Freshly married to Susan, she suddenly had a *cool* older brother who could take her to the boardwalk, who could drive her to the ice cream parlor, who could share his records and books and his tricks with her. Instead of just Susan and her, it could've been the four of them, she'd thought naively. A proper fuckin' family.

Even Billy thought it might be alright, once upon a time. Even with Neil and his shit, it wouldn't've been so bad, if Billy and Max had had each other, he figured.

It's a pity it all fell to shit and ended up fucking sideways, smoking like a trainwreck.

Now, Max won't talk to him. Won't even look in his direction.

Not that he looks at her much, either.

But he looks a little. Because she's his kid sister now, and he wants to make sure she doesn't get into the kind of shit he did. Billy knows enough to know that she's got a better brother-figure now: Steve

goddamn Harrington, the guy Billy nearly killed that one night at the Byers'. He takes her out to the diner, chauffeurs her and all her little friends around, even takes the gaggle of them to Hawkins' sorry excuse for a movie theatre. It's that kinda made-for-TV-movie shit, too saccharine and perfect for Billy to even swallow.

Too hard for Billy to measure up to, too.

"God, if you could see me now you'd be pretty fuckin' disappointed," he tells her. He imagines the way she would smile and laugh at his words, and how she'd probably tell him he was being melodramatic. She always had a way of effortlessly diffusing a situation, untying all the strings of tension to make everyone around her happy, loose, and relaxed. Whenever she walked into a room, it always got brighter, better.

Billy has the opposite of that. He walks into a room and hackles rise, tempers flare. He walks in, fists clenched, ready for a fight.

The whiskey goes down easier now.

He buries his hand in the grass next to him, letting the dewy blades press cold and damp against his skin. Dirt lodges under his nails. Dew moistens the cracks on his bloody knuckles. He hadn't fought back against Neil -- he learned not to, years ago. But he had hit a wall on his way out the door, frustrated and exhausted and *hurt*.

Early Mach is still cold as hell in Indiana. Billy doesn't have a proper jacket -- wouldn't buy one, even if he had the money. He's not sticking around long enough to need one. After he graduates, he's gone. That's -- what, a year and a half?

Who the hell is he kidding? He's never leaving this place. *No one* ever leaves this place. People get stuck here, like the goddamn dinosaurs in the tar pits. Bet they thought they'd be able to leave, too.

He used to read books about dinosaurs with his mom..

"I'm so *tired*," he says.

"If you're tired, you probably shouldn't be drinking in a cemetery at -- what, six in the morning?" a voice says from above him and to his

left.

Billy hadn't heard anyone come up. Then again, the air here eats up all the noise, leaving nothing but empty silence behind.

All Billy's gotta do is loll his head to the side and he knows he'll see Harrington's perfect pretty face staring down at him -- so he does. The world spins for a moment and Billy blinks a couple times to keep it in focus. And there he is, haloed with boring grey sky behind him: "King Steve," Billy says, slurring a little because he doesn't need to try and sound sober. Not now, not that Steve's caught him drinking whiskey in a graveyard at ass-o'clock in the morning. "Fancy seeing you here."

Steve is wearing sunglasses for whatever fuckin' reason. It's barely even light out, but whatever. Billy guesses he thinks he's cool, still. Harrington raises his eyebrows over the glasses in what is undoubtedly a judgemental look.

"She a friend of yours?" Steve says, nodding at the gravestone Billy's using as a backrest.

"Annette and I go way back," Billy says with a laugh, punctuating his words with a slosh of whiskey.

"Maybe you should cool it a little on that," Steve tells him.

They haven't spoken much outside of school, and they've spoken even less off of the basketball court or outside shared classes. If he's being honest, and apparently this morning he is, Billy's been avoiding it. It's the guilt from that night at the Byers, plus the fact that Billy finds Steve's presence deeply unsettling. Harrington always makes him feel off-balance, like he's blindfolded and teetering on the edge of a cliff. He feels unmoored by it, disturbed and agitated about it. Their encounters too often end in Billy baring his teeth and snarling like a goddamn dog, feeling the need to posture until his body breaks, until his heart explodes.

Harrington always walks away first.

"What're you, my mom?" Billy asks -- and then the irony hits and he

barks out a laugh. It's a loud and harsh sound, somehow, echoing in the silence of the cemetery. Like the muffling dirt refuses to consume that one pitiful noise out of all the rest it's eaten up today. It reverberates around them, broken and bloody, and Billy laughs about it some more.

Steve takes a breath -- and that's loud, too. Billy can hear it perfectly, after the laughter has drained out of him and left him feeling empty and weirdly raw. Harrington moves, slowly, like Billy's some wild animal who's gonna run on him, and crouches down next to Billy. It's stupid, really. It ain't like Billy's gonna dart away -- he's too drunk for that; he'd be to unsteady on his feet. The ground would meet him halfway, and he'd just end up with a mouthful of cemetery grass. Gross.

The silence grows and stretches in between them for a moment. Billy can't take his eyes off of Steve. He's close enough touch, if Billy wanted to.

Eventually, Steve opens that mouth of his, pink lips and pearly teeth. "Look, man -- are you okay?" Steve asks, which is pretty much the exact opposite of what Billy thought he'd say. Not that he really thought much about what Steve *would* say. Just -- not that. Evidently.

"Just peachy," Billy says. He takes another sip and holds the bottle out to Steve, who makes a face at the acrid smell of it.

Steve takes the bottle anyway. Billy's ready and resigned for Steve to take it away, to put it out of Billy's reach -- but instead, he whispers something under his breath and brings it to his lips to take a healthy slug.

Billy hoots in victory, fist pumping in the air.

Strangely, Steve doesn't ask why Billy's out in the cemetery at six in the morning. He doesn't ask why Billy's face is rearranged, his lip reopening every time Billy talks. He doesn't ask why Billy's shivering in a leather jacket, using whiskey as a blanket instead of wearing something warmer.

They pass the bottle between them for a while.

Billy doesn't ask why Steve's out here, either. Who knows -- maybe he's just an early bird. In the time Billy's been in Hawkins, he's learned that Harrington's just a weird guy, full of hidden depths and shit. Originally, he'd thought it was malicious -- probably because Billy'd wanted to hate the guy *so badly* -- but he doesn't think that's the case, anymore.

"Have you slept at all?" Steve asks. Billy still kinda wants to hate him, though.

"Nah," Billy says, tearing a piece of grass apart between numb fingers.

A moment passes between them, long and steady, before Steve says, "Yeah, me neither."

School is going to be starting, soon, Billy thinks. He can't even fathom the idea of trying to sit in class, trying to make it through today without breaking anyone who came near him. Not that he really wants to break Steve, and Steve is near enough. Maybe it's because he's already broken the guy. Paths taken, and all that.

"Donno' what time it is," Billy says. "But you'll wanna skedaddle if you don't want a tardy."

"What?" Harrington says, looking at Billy, expression obscured behind the lenses of his Ray Bans. "And miss this killer party with you and Annette?" He reaches over and pats the gravestone right next to Billy's head. His hands are big, surprisingly so. Nimble, though, and strong. He's so close that Billy can practically feel the heat radiating off of Harrington, though he knows that's gotta be his imagination. Just a passing thought.

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," Harrington says.

"Great," Billy says, mustering up some sarcasm to drip from his words, heavy and sticky like molasses. In truth, he's actually a little glad that Steve is here, but he's not about to say that. He feels warmer now, and he's got a sneaking suspicion that it's not just the booze.

Billy never apologized for breaking Steve's face. Billy left him good and bruised for *weeks*, his handiwork all over Steve's pretty visage for everyone to see. But Steve hadn't sulked -- he'd worn it all with pride. Billy would've been annoyed, if he hadn't been so impressed. He hadn't *really* wanted to hurt Steve so bad -- but it had all boiled over in the worst possible moment. And then Steve had to go and be *sketchy as hell* about Billy's kid sister.

He trusts Max enough, for whatever goddamn reason, to believe her when she says Steve is a good guy. *I trust him, Billy. Leave him and the rest of my friends the hell alone*, she'd said. She didn't even need the bat, that time, to make her point. The fire in her eyes had said enough. And maybe he respects that a bit, too.

Billy Hargrove doesn't apologize.

But he does share his cheap whiskey. He shares his spot next to Annette. He shares this strange and silent place with Steve and doesn't ask any questions when Steve slides his sunglasses off to rub at tired, bloodshot eyes. It looks like Steve hasn't slept in *days*, and still Billy doesn't ask.

"Lemme see those," Billy says instead, nudging Steve's leg with his foot, eyes on the sunglasses resting loose in Steve's fingers.

When Steve hands them over, Billy just grins and slides them onto his face. He watches the world go dark around him. It's kinda nice, looking at everything muted in this way. The nothingness of Indiana fades even more. Like this, Steve's face looks a little more human, a little more well-rested. Like this, Billy can let his eyes linger on those eyes, those lips, those cheekbones for as long as he wants.

"Do I look like King Steve?" Billy asks, putting on the pout that Steve makes on occasion when he's deep in thought, though Billy can't really stop his lips from quirking up at the sides. He feels a little too giddy, thanks to the whiskey.

"Hey, asshole, my face doesn't look like that!" Steve says, but his words are without heat, and he only lazily pushes at Billy's arm with lingering fingers. He just sounds amused. Friendly, in the drunk sort of way. Billy understands that feeling.

He can't help himself -- Billy puts on his best smile. The kind he reserves for Karen Wheeler-types, for little old waitresses at diners who think he's the bee's-knees. "Nah, for real though, how do I look?" Billy asks.

"Real sharp, Hargrove." Steve shoves at him again. "But you already knew that."

And yeah, maybe that's true. But maybe Billy just wanted to hear Steve say it. It certainly feels good, that kind of validation. And maybe, if Billy squints, it feels a little bit like forgiveness, too.

Even if it falls silent again, after that, Billy doesn't mind so much. He keeps Steve's sunglasses on, drinks, and stares.

Steve looks everywhere -- and at Billy, too.

They're on the wobbly edge of something. Sand, shifting and moving beneath their feet with each crashing wave. Maybe it's friendship, or maybe it's a mutual lack of sleep. Maybe it's just drunken camaraderie -- but, in the end, it doesn't really matter. All that matters is that when Billy drops his knee against Steve's and lets the heat of Steve's body seep through his jeans, Steve doesn't pull back, doesn't shy away.

"It's cold, man," Steve says. He's got a proper winter coat on, or something like one, anyway. Whatever it is, it's better than Billy's. But Billy is a gentleman, so he scoots further over on Annette's tombstone, making space next to him, making space for Steve.

"Well?" Billy asks, when Steve doesn't immediately move to sidle up next to him. "What are you waiting for? I don't bite." Billy bares his teeth at that, like a goddamn dog, and licks his lips. Like he's trying to prove his own point wrong.

Steve rolls his red-rimmed eyes and shuffles over, movements slurred and sodden with alcohol. He's kind of clumsy, in an endearing way: a colt with doe eyes just learning how to walk. Billy helps by grabbing Steve's arm and pulling him close, before Steve can get any ideas about leaving space between them. Maybe Billy's a little cold, too.

Instantly, he feels better, warmer, with the long line of Steve's body pressed against his side, his arm, his leg. Billy wants to fold himself into Steve's heat, like a warm blanket, fresh out of the dryer, but he doesn't. He takes another drink, instead.

Steve takes one, too.

After a while, Billy realizes he's leaning heavily against Steve, the drunken weight of his flagging body supported by Steve's solid frame next to him. Steve is slumping a little, too, even though Billy got a head start on him with the whiskey.

"I donno where she's buried," Billy says, after a long spell of silence. His words sound detached, foreign. His mouth opens, and they just spill out, unbidden and too soft. "Don't remember. Somewhere in Santa Barbara. That's like, what -- two thousand miles away." It's two thousand one hundred, but who's counting?

Steve doesn't ask who. Billy doesn't even know why he *said* anything. It's not like Steve cares. It's not like Billy needed to share in the first place -- even though it makes him feel strangely light. Like it's a relief, mentioning her to someone else on this day. Billy can't bring her up in his own house, he knows that for sure.

"Shit, man," is what Steve says. No painful *sorry*, no frustrating *do you want to talk about it?* Just -- *shit, man*. And it's somehow perfect.

Billy says: "She died five years ago today." It feels like forever. It feels like yesterday.

He doesn't know why he says it, but the words are out before he has a chance to take them back.

He takes another gulp of whiskey to wash away the tightness in his throat, to push back the burning behind his eyes. He clenches his teeth until his jaw hurts, until he can focus on that, instead. His insides are twisted and gnarled, but Steve is right there beside him, leaning a little bit more of his weight against Billy. He's a solid guy, less frail than he looks on the basketball court and less fragile, too. The press of him is unyielding and certain. It's the closest thing to a hug Billy's had in years.

"I can't remember the last time I slept through the night," Steve says. It should sound random, because it is -- but Billy gets the distinct impression that it's something like a secret, too. A small gift, straight from Steve's lips.

Tit for tat.

"I hate basketball," Billy says, after a beat. Because that's a secret, too. "But I'm damn good at it." He likes being good at it, though. So that makes up for it. It makes it fun.

Steve laughs, his whole body shaking against Billy's side. Steve's leg, knees pulled up, drops, until it's half-resting against Billy's own. Under it, Billy's thigh is warm -- no, *hot* -- at the point of contact. He doesn't feel cold at all, anymore, not after more of Steve's heat starts seeping underneath Billy's skin and through his veins.

"I haven't applied to any colleges," Steve says.

"I don't have enough money to move back to California."

A beat. A breath. Another gulp of whiskey passed between the two of them.

-- I don't -- I don't think I miss Nancy like I should."

Billy pauses, and then: "I think I'm gonna to keep these sunglasses," Billy says, tone both pondering and teasing in turns.

Steve makes an affronted noise and turns to look at him. "Don't you dare, Hargrove. Those were --" Steve trails off before he can finish the thought.

"Expensive?" Billy says, turning to look at Steve too. He's *so close*. It's not really a surprise. They're sitting in a space realistically designed just for one, not an inch of air between them. But that doesn't change the fact that Steve is close, that Billy can smell the whiskey on his breath and can now map out the exact way Steve's skin flushes when he drinks. His eyes are glassy and his lips are chapped from cold air, from being bitten too much.

"Yeah, that," Steve breathes out. Billy watches his lips, the way they

look a little puzzled, a little pleased, too. His mouth is just a little bit open, like he's short of breath. Billy's head is swimming, dizzy. His lips are tingling, and he feels a little short of breath, too.

It feels precarious. Dangerous. Like the sand's shifting too fast underneath him, the waves coming in too hard.

"Pancakes," Billy says, suddenly.

"Huh?"

"Pancakes. I really want pancakes," Billy says.

He takes off the sunglasses and slides them onto Steve's face, all careful-like. Steve looks less exhausted with them on, dark-circles hidden behind even darker shades, though Billy misses being able to see his eyes. "And I think you're loaded enough that you can afford to buy me some," Billy grins.

It's a gamble. They're not friends. As far as Billy knows, this careful treaty or truce or whatever it is between them could only extend as far as the cemetery gates. Billy can't help but push it though, push the boundaries of this thing like he always does. For once, though, it's not to see if he can break it, but to see if he can stretch it further because he wants more of it.

Maybe because he *needs* more of it, too.

There are dying fields all over Hawkins. They are barren and parched, blackened from inherent lack. Billy feels just like them now, like a dried-up field presented with the refreshment of spring's first real rain. Thirsty and greedy for life, for nourishment -- for Steve's attention and his steady, staggering heat.

Steve swallows. Billy watches his adam's apple as it bobs on the pale, mole-dotted skin of his neck. "I guess I could spare a couple dollars for a charity case," he muses. The way he says it is fond, like Billy could pay for himself, if he wanted to. Like Steve's just being nice. It's not at all the truth, but somehow, Billy isn't offended by it like he should be. Instead, he just smiles.

"Shucks, Harrington, that's awful nice of you."

“Yeah, I’m a real good samaritan.”

Billy lingers next to Steve for a moment longer, like he’s trying to soak up all the heat he can and store it for later. Like he’s trying to commit this drunken moment to hazy memory. He thinks it’d be nice to look back on, maybe, when he’s inevitably at Harrington’s throat again.

Eventually, he pulls away because he has to. He staggers to his feet and offers Steve a hand up. When Steve hesitates before taking his hand, Billy just waggles his fingers.

“I dropped you once,” Billy says, vividly and viscerally remembering the exact moment he’d pushed Steve back to the ground on the court. “Twice, if you count the time I knocked you clean out.” At the Byers’. Yeah, that sure as hell counts as a drop. “I don’t plan on doing it again,” Billy says, and the words taste a hell of a lot more like the honey of truth than they should.

Billy shouldn’t be promising shit. And yet, here he is.

With a stupid lack of hesitation, Steve slips his warm hand into Billy’s.

Billy hauls him to his feet with a laugh and a tug. It’s enough of a hard yank, and they’re both drunk and uncoordinated enough, that the force of it has Steve colliding with Billy’s chest. Stumbling and unbalanced. Billy gets a quick arm around Steve, unwilling to let him fall after *just* promising the opposite. The open whiskey bottle falls to the ground in the movement, abandoned, the rest of it pouring itself into the grass. It doesn’t matter. Steve is warm and close in Billy’s arms.

“The whiskey,” Steve says, looking down with a frown. The bottle is nearly empty, now. Spilling its remains into the soil over Annette’s grave. *Let her have it*, Billy thinks.

Billy releases Steve from his hold and takes a too-reluctant step back from Steve’s comfort. “It was shitty, anyway.”

“God, it was *so bad*,” Steve laughs.

“Shut up, pretty boy,” Billy says, throwing an arm around Steve’s shoulders, unable to keep himself from Steve’s heat for that long, apparently. “You’re keeping me from pancakes.”

Steve leans into him and loops an arm around Billy’s waist. His palm settles on Billy’s ribs, scalding where it lands. He takes one step forward, pulling Billy with him. Then, another. Billy goes where Steve leads him, falling into step next to Harrington. “Well, we wouldn’t want *that*.”

They walk to the diner, stumbling and laughing and tangled too close together. It’s cold, Billy knows, but he can’t seem to feel it any longer. He doesn’t pull away, though. Not quite yet.

I miss you, Billy thinks, a little while before they make it to the diner and have to break apart, his head lolling onto Steve’s shoulder with a huff of a laugh. *This place is a shit show, but I guess it could be worse.*

Author's Note:

you can find me on [tumblr](#), if you are so inclined.